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ABSTRACT

A study sought to find the most common errors of second grade story-writers. Subjects, 96 second graders from 5 classes, wrote 3 stories each without any help from their teachers on topics chosen by the teachers ("The Funniest Thing that Ever Happened to Me," "Winter," and "My Special Holiday"). Stories were collected and read and every amount and kind of error was documented. Lists were made and kinds of errors tallied in order to determine where the most problems lay. Results showed spelling as the most common error followed by capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and context. (One table of data is included and 19 references are attached.) (Author/SR)

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The Most Common Errors of Second Grade Story-Writers

by

Nancy C. Luts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to find the most common errors of second grade story-writers.

Ninety-six second graders from five classes wrote three stories without any help from their teachers (such as brainstorming, webbing, etc.) to determine what errors children make at this age during the writing process. Their teachers chose three common topics entitled, The Funniest Thing that Ever Happened to Me, Winter, and My Special Holiday. Their stories were collected and read and every amount and kind of error documented. Lists were made and kinds of errors were tallied in order to determine where the most problems lay. Results showed spelling as being the most common error followed by capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and context.

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Writing uses marks to represent words. These marks represent words according to a socially agreed upon set of relationships. Anyone who wants to write must know what unit of language their written symbols represent. The would-be writer must also know how the symbols do the representing. Beginning writers of English seem to proceed like this: "They first discover the unit of language the symbols are to represent (word, syllable, or phoneme); they invent a plausible way for the symbols to represent language units; then they revise their invented spelling in favor of the standard spelling used around them." (Temple, 1988).

Writing plays a crucial role in children's learning to read. Rather than developing after reading, as the traditional approach to reading readiness assumed, writing accompanies young children's growing interest in naming letters and reading print (Noyce and Christie, 1989).

Every day in our society we hear of more illiteracy, either or both in reading and writing. Roy H. Forbes, director of The National Assessment of Educational Progress concludes, "The written word is in trouble and demands immediate attention." (Fadiman and Howard, 1979). Part of the reason may lie in the assumption that children want to express themselves, but may not yet have the vocabulary or know-how to do so. Children will continue to write only if they find that it becomes easier to match their thoughts and feelings more exactly to the words they write. Communication about a particular idea in a variety of contexts is at the very heart of writing, but the child's vocabulary needs continue enrichment. (Sealey, Sealey, Millmore, 1979).

Another reason may be that teacher expectations are sometimes too great for the student abilities. Primary motivation is a function of desire or need. They will arise naturally as a result of the child's feelings about his experiences, but only in environments where writing is seen as a legitimate form of the expression of such feelings. (Sealey, Sealey, Millmore, 1979).

Most children are given every opportunity to learn the proper writing techniques needed to survive in society and are still not achieving that goal. Preparation for the High School Proficiency Test and the current emphasis on emergent literacy are only two reasons why studies on writing behaviors during the elementary years are needed.

HYPOTHESIS

To provide additional evidence concerning this topic, a study was conducted to ascertain just what kind of writing errors youngsters in the primary grades make while expressing their thoughts and experiences through teacher instruction and curriculum. It was hypothesized that these errors could be categorized as spelling, punctuation, grammar, or inappropriate/inaccurate material in context.

LIMITATIONS

The number of students participating in this study was limited to those in second grade only. It was thought that the second grade was an appropriate choice for this study since; (1) writing was a major district goal at this time and, (2) student, interest, motivation, past experiences, and ability to verbalize and express themselves through the printed word are beginning to manifest themselves at this stage of development.

DELIMITATIONS

This study dealt with small class sizes in a suburban community near Madison, New Jersey. Students were grouped from five second grades where previous teaching techniques and strategies for instruction had been implemented and previous student experiences varied.

PROCEDURES

Exactly ninety-six second graders from a nearby suburban school district participated in this study to determine the most common errors in second grade story-writing. Each of these seccond graders were requested to write three stories on topics that the five teachers agreed upon. These topics were entitled, The Funniest Thing that Ever Happened to Me, Winter, and My Special Holiday.

Because accuracy in the results was wanted, each teacher was requested not to use any previous teaching techniques, such as brainstorming, webbing, discussion, etc., just allow the students to write what they wanted without any help whatsoever. The author was looking for invented spelling, etc.

Each class took three weeks in which to write their pre-edited version of their stories. At the end of the three weeks, these stories were collected and read and every amount and kind of error documented.

Lists were made and kinds of errors were tallied in order to determine where the most problems lay.

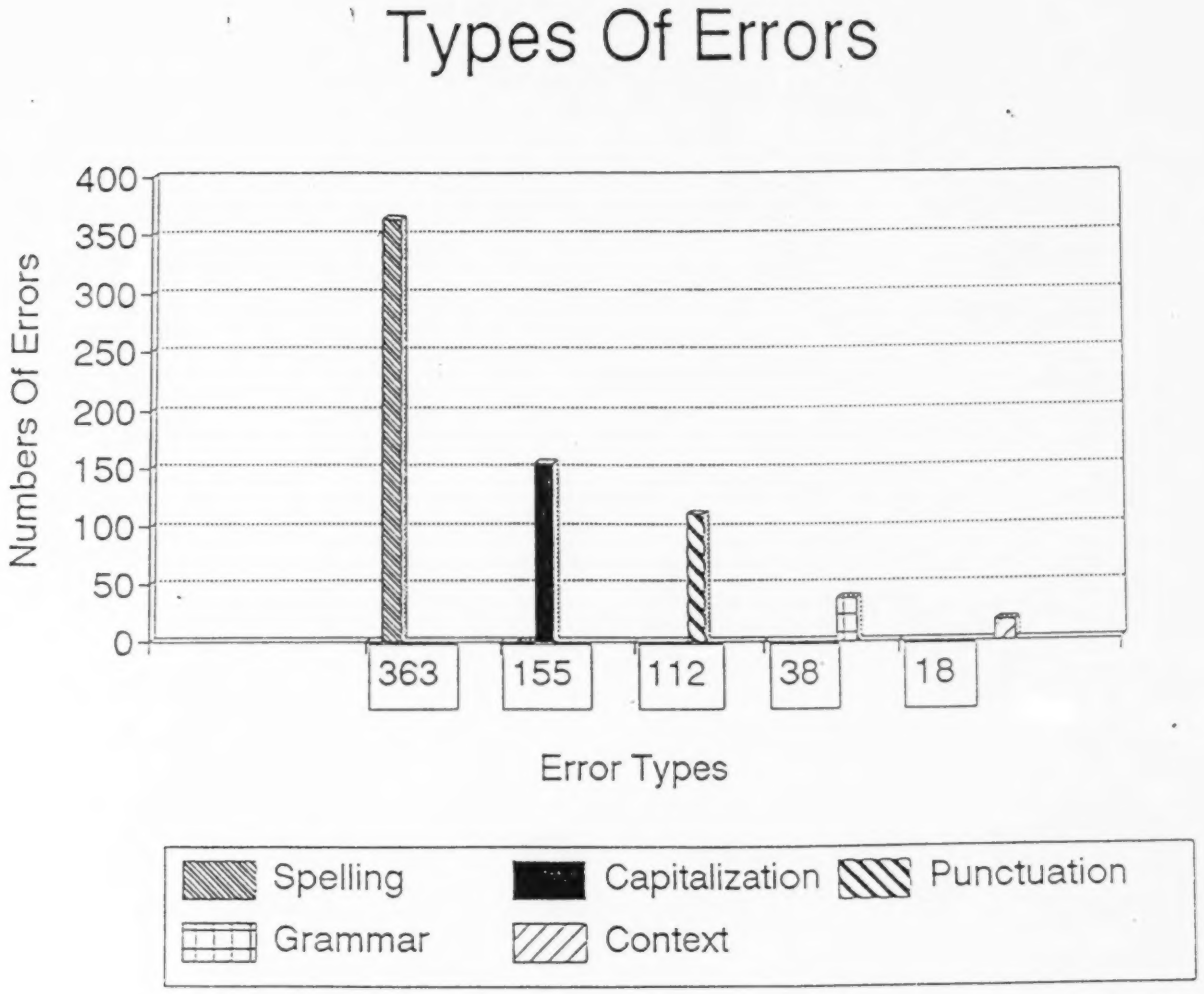
RESULTS

As noted in Table I, there were a large number of errors of five types. The major errors were in the area of spelling. Three hundred sixty-three spelling errors were divided into eight categories; omissions (47), letter reversals (11), endings without dropping final letter (7), double consonants missing + endings (19), letters added (3), er-ir-ur-or (7), multiple spellings (70), and miscellaneous.

Most omissions were vowels, letter reversals were of the ie combination or ri as in gril. All errors in words with endings without dropping the final letter were those using "ing" as in comeing, jokeing, etc. Some examples of the double consonants missing + endings were sliped, pupy, stoped, pudle. The three words that added letters were babby, allso, and longger. Cherch, hert, werk, Saterday, ferget, firgot, and docter were in the er-ir-ur-or combination. Multiple spellings for the same word were a separate category because there were so many of the same word that it was worth noting them in this way. The largest multiple-spelled word was presents--prezints, presnets, presenst, prests, prezents, presnts, presints, presens. The rest of the words were in the miscellaneous category because there were so many that didn't fall into a particular category.

Other areas of errors were in context, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

Context errors showed run-on sentences using too many ands (15 times) and those with too many thens (3 times).


Types Of Errors
Numbers Of Errors
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
363
155
112
38
18
Error Types
Spelling
Capitalization
Punctuation
Grammar
Context

There were (16) grammar errors broken down into verb usage, such as, is for was (1), thereself/themself (3), was/were (2), won't/wouldn't (1), ran/run (2), throw/threw (1), then/then (1), sleeped/slept (1), should of/should have (1), it was very fun (2), snowmans (1), and (22) errors in the area of homophones.

There were 81 capitalization errors that occurred in the middle of the sentences, 45 at the beginning, 14 where titles were indicated, 12 in quotation sentences, and 3 times in the use of I. Students neglected to capitalize formal names, titles, occasions, and at the beginning of quotes. The second most common capitalization error appeared at the beginning of sentences when students became engrossed in their story content and forgot to capitalize the first word in the rest of their story sentences.

Punctuation errors also occured at the end of sentences where periods were needed (37) or question marks (2) . Commas were omitted during sequencing (first, next, last, etc.) and in sentences using quotes (34). Apostrophes were omitted showing ownership (14) and contractions (10), and quotation marks were forgotten (15 times).

CONCLUSIONS

While the hypothesis of this study was that pupil errors could be categorized as spelling, punctuation, grammar, inappropriate/inaccurate material in context, it was shown that these and capitalization errors appeared, but no inappropriate/inaccurate material in context appeared. Therefore, the hypothesis was only partially accepted. While it was not surprising to see the number and variety of capitalization errors, the fact that

no inappropriate/inaccurate material in context appeared among the number and variety of stories written suggest that students, even at this early age, use a format of telling a story which is organized around one theme or idea.

This study has shown that children want to express themselves, but may not yet have the vocabulary or spelling expertise to do so. The stories submitted for corrections showed interest and motivation in their content, but needed improvement from invented spellings and inappropriate punctuation. A similar study in an urban school district with the same age group, might show similar results.

Children's Writing:

RELATED RESEARCH

Composition literally means "putting together." Temple defines composition as putting together the details of a message in a form that is understandable to an audience (1988). He makes the points that (1) children can compose before they write by using speech, drawing pictures, and telling about themselves, (2) children incorporate in their compositions bits and pieces of what they have heard and read in the words of others, (3) in composing, children are challenged to juggle the interests of self, audience, topic, and purpose in the writing, and (4) compositions follow familiar patterns or forms.

As children enter school, they bring with them all their experiences and family/cultural background. One of the most nagging problems that confronts the teacher of language is the usage a child brings with him to school may still be in the pupil's speech after years of schooling. Three important factors that need to be considered in teaching appropriate usage are the (1) influences outside and inside the school, (2) items selected for teaching, and (3) methods of instruction.

One of the chief causes of deficiency in standard oral and written expression is lack of experience and practice in using these forms. A study by Doris Noel confirmed this relationship between the quality of the child's language usage and quality and the types of language used in the home. From her findings, she concluded that (1) language which the child hears his parents use, to a large degree, determines the quality of the child's language usage and (2) the parents must cooperate with the schools in seeing that the child hears and practices "school talk" in the home if change is to be made. (1953).

Moyer conducted a study entitled, "Does Ear Training Help?" He questioned if two troups are taught English usage, one by the conventional method and the other by an ear training method, would the latter progress as well on standardized tests on usage? A problem was to discover which group would gain more in quality of "oral expression an oral composition" (1956).

The experimental group used the ear training procedure. No formal exercises or written drills were used. Almost all lesson periods were used to record and analyze the effectiveness of the language in stories, reports, or children's games. Teacher-prepared materials were only used when the students did not have something which they needed to record.

The second part of the study was conducted under similar conditions a year later. The follow-up was to discover what effect ear training had on the quality of oral expression and composition and to discover if the changes which appeared in the initial period would become more pronounced. Stories of both groups were recorded in September and again in January with the differences evaluated.

Moyer found the children in the experimental groups made strikingly greater gains than those of the control group in both their oral expression and compositions. He concluded that ear training through the use of a recording device can alter very effectively the speech level of children. It provides not only a knowledge of standard form, but also helps in other aspects of oral expression. Ear training can help establish the good habits of speech which need to become automatic for effectiveness in social communication--much of the drills can be omitted.

The main idea is to remember that pupils learn what they do. If pupils are to speak and write well, they must be given an opportunity in writing and speaking. Therefore, usage should not be taught as a separate subject, but used to assist the pupils with their oral and written expression (Moyer).

Noel feels that teachers should teach by example and not by words alone. They should be the model and provide opportunities for pupils to use the "new" acceptable English.

In beginning speech, children do not trade in their immature speech for mature adult speech all at once. They always go through a sequence of stages of language usage, moving from simple to complex. Children formulate their own rules to help them understand sentences they hear around them to produce their own sentences. Once they formulate a rule, they use it confidently until they begin to notice differences between their sentences and the sentences adults use. Then they will gradually add to and amend their rules so that they are able to produce sentences more like adults (DeVilliers and DeVilliers, 1979).

Another common cause for ineffectiveness of usage instruction may be involved in the selection of items to be taught. In an extensive listing of standards which should be set, Robert C. Pooley begins his list with the elimination of baby-talk and 'cute' expressions and correct uses in speech and writing of I, me, she, him, and her. As his list becomes more involved and detailed, one realizes the absence of grade-placement for the various items. However, he feels the needed forms should be emphasized at any grade level.

The teacher is finally faced with the decision as to the method of instruction needed for her students. As many usage lessons as possible should be presented in an inductive manner. Following the instructional lessons, intensive practice would be provided.

Teachers should make every effort and opportunity for writing in the classroom (and out) by having plenty of models of print at children's height around the classroom, having materials children can write upon and utensils with which to write, and asking an occasional question or set up an occasional challenge that will lead to print.

Donald Graves says the tone is set in process-writing classrooms by what the teacher DOES not by what the teacher SAYS (Temple, 1988).

Temple explains the three types of spelling as invented/letter names (using initial consonants, consonant digraphs, or sounds), standard/traditional (looking like English words, but spelling incorrectly), and correct spelling.

These writing systems are broken down into ideographic, syllabic, and alphabetic writing. In the ideographic writing, each symbol stands for an idea (such as road sign symbols, or the large yellow M for McDonalds, etc.) Chinese writing is a modern system based on the principel of using a single symbol to represent an idea. In ancient times, the symbols were pictures of the things they represented. Through constant usage, the symbols came to look less like pictures and the meanings became abstracted from the original concrete things that the symbols stood for. As a result of the abstraction of both symbol and meaning, modern Chinese writing has evolved as an elaborate and versatile system capable of representing approximately the same range of ideas that English writing can. The pictural basis of Chinese writing gives it one advantage that alphabetic writing systems do not have.

The syllabic writing uses symbols for syllables. "There are few syllabic writing systems besides Japanese in active use nowadays. But in ancient times these systems were widespread. The spoken language of Japanese makes use of forty-six different syllables. Combinations of syllables from those forty-six make up every word in the language. One example of the way our children could use this writing would be in a kindergartner's "spelling of B Z for Bonanza (Gelb, 1963).

The use of the alphabet as we know it was a Greek invention. Five thousand years ago, the Greeks discovered that the syllables in circulation at the time did not fit their language. The scribes needed a system that would allow them to choose what combinations of consonants and vowels they wanted. Instead of representing a whole syllable (vowel plus a consonant), the new Greek symbols would represent either a consonant or vowel, but not both. This was the beginning of our alphabet (Gelb).

All three of these writing systems are in existence today and for children to discover how to write in English involves making choices from a very large range of alternatives.

Every classroom has both a physical and intellectual atmosphere. Besides the expected proper lighting and ventilation, a healthy intellectual atmosphere is one with a currriculum rich in substance, where writing is received with enthusiasm and respect, where praise is given, where children are helped to discover their next goal, and where purposeful audience exists for each student's writing. Young writers feel they can take risks and make mistakes without fear or rejection. Children will come to feel and know that trying new forms and experimenting are an important part of the writing process.

Many elementary curricula make provisions for composition. Children are provided with a variety of experiences designed to motivate them to write. This happens in kindergarten when a teacher draws children together after a trip to a fire station and encourages them to dictate their reactions to the experience (Stewig, 1975).

A child's choice of topic can either set the writing stage or destroy it. Once children write about things that matter to them and they know about, they are glad to rehearse and draft because they have the opportunity to try and get closer to their thoughts. On the other hand, if they are forced to write about issues that do not inspire an image or emotion, then revision is pointless. (Temple, 1989).

In describing the literature input provided for children by teachers in British Infant Schools, Blake states, "Reading to children not only stimulates thought and brings forms of literature to children they might not ordinarily read...but..it also helps improve writing style through hearing the vocabulary, sentence construction, grammar and syntactical arrangements, organization, and approach used by other writers."

Just as important as the writing process, is the response writing brings. Too many times, teachers respond with bright stickers or smiling faces. We can give helpful suggestions without being too critical. Conferencing is also an important factor between teacher and child which can be informal or formal. Informal conferences can occur when children need trouble-shooting advice such as asking relevent questions or making suggestions. Formal conferences are arranged during a drafting process. Peer conferences can also be helpful for inspriation.

Publishing children's work is an important part of process writing classrooms. They can be in the form of literary journals, classroom or school newspapers, national magazines, bulletin boards, plays or shows, songs, and the list is as good as one's imagination.

The satisfaction children experience when their writing is complete provide secondary motivation to write. Primary motivation is a function of desire or need. Such desires and needs cannot be switched on and off by teachers. They will arise naturally as a result of the child's feelings about his experiences, but only in environments where writing is seen as a legitimate form of the expression of such feelings (Sealey, 1979).

The implication is that the classroom must be a place in which writing is a "natural" activity. Such a classroom will contain appropriate locations and materials for writing to take place, and these will be in use by some children most of the time.

Children will continue to write only if they find that it becomes easier to match their thoughts and feelings more exactly to the words they write. This is a process which never ends and we, as adults, are faced with the same problem.

Donald Murray's writing model is a process of continuous thinking, experimenting, and reviewing. The activity of writing a paper/story develops in three stages--rehearsing, drafting, and revising.

Rehearsing is the stage in which writers discover what they have to say and teachers can encourag rehearsing by means of brainstorming sessions in which children think and write down as many details as they can about a person,

place, or event that is meaningful to them. Sometimes teachers can use free writing in which the writer puts down absolutely anything that occurs to him/her without stopping and without making any corrections for a specified period of time (usually 5-10 minutes).

Drafting is the second stage of writing. It is a sort of tentative activity. It is during this stage that the writer experiences clearly what he has to say. Drafting enables the writer to put his thoughts outside of himself and to consider them as if they belonged to someone else. The writer may even have a dialogue with himself.

Revising is the final stage although we should keep in mind there are many revisions and drafts. This is a matter of patching up phrases or sentences in order to make them smoother or clearer. Sometimes, the writer discovers completely new possibilities that should also be developed. In Murray's words, "the writing stands apart from the writer, and the writer interacts with it, first to find out what it has to day, and then to help the writing say it more clearly and gracefully" (1980).

Betty Flowers gives us some suggestions to make the different mental forces at work more comprehensible to children. She presents students with four role models--the Madman, Architect, Carpenter, and Judge. She feels a writer takes on each of these roles, one at a time, and works through their drafts. Just as Murray "rehearses," Flower's Madman is full of ideas, writes crazily, or sloppily, and gets carried away by enthusiasm or anger.

The next day, the Architect is called in to read over what the Madman has written and looks for parts that are worth keeping and developing. His job is to "select large chunks of material and arrange them into a pattern that might form an argument."

The Carpenter is called in after the basic structure of the piece is ready. He "nails" the ideas together in a logical sequence, making sure each sentence is clearly written, contributes to the paragraph, and gradefully and logically leads to the next sentence. The writing should be smooth by the time the Carpenter leaves.

The Judge is called last to read over the whole piece, reflects on what he hears, and compares it with what the author wanted to say.

Whether a teacher uses Murray's or Flower's method of writing, young children should be able to comprehend the sequencing in each and apply them to their own writing.

According to Hadley, "the three major contributions which cause poor writing ability are teaching penmanship, both printed and cursive, spelling, and expressive writing." (This study will not discuss penmanship or handwriting in detail).

Children need help in writing when (1) their writing is not readable or legible to others and thus the intended reader cannot decipher the written message, (2) their spelling distorts or changes the meaning of the message to the extent that the reader cannot understand it or breaks his concentration so he loses the train of thought, (3) their choice of words and sentence arrangements either misrepresents the intended message or makes it unintelligible. In each of these cases the result of inadequate writing ability leads to poor communication.

To decide between beginning instruction or remedial writing, the teacher should consider the individual needs and the educational level of the child. Before beginning lessons, a diagnosis should be made to determine the child's strengths and weaknesses.

It is difficult for children to spell words correctly while they are writing, because they are so intent on what they are trying to say. Even when rereading their writing, children may not notice their spelling errors if the spelling seems close enough to express their thoughts.

Poor spellers are often poor readers and their errors reflect the same mistakes in recognizing, pronouncing, and writing words. Because of the close relationship between reading, writing, and spelling, children should be brought to realize the need for spelling their words correctly. In addition, improving a child's spelling often improves his reading and pronouncing of troublesome words.

Burns feels that teaching spelling will be simplified by remembering that a child who has a clear picture of a word in his mind will only need to think of it to be able to spell it automatically. The words a child learns to read, expecially those in his sight vocabulary, often have their letter shapes and sounds imprinted clearly enough so that he does not have to study them. A child with a firm grasp of the letter/sounds should easily be able to spell the words that are written in the same way that they sound. The other words that are not spelled the way they sound are learned one at a time by memorization and practice. Spelling rules are so numerous and have so many exceptions that effort is better spent learning to words directly.

In memorizing a word, children should be told that they must repeat it and use it in as many ways as they can. After commonly occurring words have been learned, children can be introduced to more difficult and less often used words taken from books, newspapers, magazines, or even the dictionary.

Another method of selecting spelling words is to suggest that children sort out unfamiliar words from their readings. Involving children in choosing their own list of spelling words encourages them to become more aware of and question their current knowledge of word spellings and meaning.

Still another way to find spelling errors in children's writing is for the instructor to watch what the child writes. Some spelling errors are just due to carelessness. Also, occasionally, it is found that a child who spells dictated words incorrectly is not hearing them correctly. This would obviously call for professional advice and testing.

In "Back to Basics in the Schools," George Weber defines 'functional illiterate' as: "An adult or young person who lacks the reading and writing ability to cope with the minimal economic, social, cultural, and political demands of daily living in today's society. Sometimes extended to include arithmetic and rudimentary practical knowledge. Modern society takes for granted a relatively high level of literacy. The result is a paradox, because of the achievement of ever higher levels of education, modern America has become so literate that it has far more 'functional illiterates' (both in numbers and as a percentage of the population) than was the case a century ago. Exactly what the present minimal functional literacy level is, is open to debate, but it certainly includes the ability to read and write well enough to get and to

perform satisfactorily the most routine jobs; to fill out common forms; to read an average daily newspaper, signs, instructions, and directions; and to write simple messages and letters. Roughly fifteen percent of American young people are functional illiterates.

Perhaps we adults can roughly measure our literacy by using as a standard that large class of people whose very trade requires clear and correct language: newspaper journalists. On November 1, 1977, columnist James J. Kilpatrick reported that a group of Associated Press managing editors was viewing young journalists' copy with a jaundiced eye. "Their sentences wander off in all directions," wrote Kilpatrick, "their spelling is only so-so; their sense of organization is seldom very keen...The most common fault is the imprecise word (Kilpatrick, 1977).

In the past, colleges were not duty-bound to teach mere writing 'competence.' At Stanford University in 1976, three-fourths of the freshmen who scored 700 or higher (which is top scoring) on the College Board English Achievement test had to study remedial composition because they failed the university's own writing test, similar to a University of California's Subject A exam.

Dr. Lois DeBakey felt the academic values adopted by peers usually affect school achievement along with the observable influence of television on literacy and writing. She felt that television stresses immediacy and diversion and the child, making a natural transfer, expects education to be similarly immediate and diverting. Thus, "by the time a child enters school, his attention span may be abbreviated to a few minutes or less." Writing makes infinitely greater demands on attention. Similarly, the high 'visibility' of television

conditions the child against the naked printed word, so that many children "have difficulty understanding a story that is not illustrated." The effect on learning to write is obvious. "Is it any wonder, asks DeBakey, "that children, after satisfying their psysiologic and psychologic needs with instant information, instant pleasure, and instant food, balk at school assignments like writing," that require prolonged effort for mastery.

Dr. DeBakey also points out television's role as the provider of life models. Being wordly wise, like so many of television's child actors, "seems more appealing than being literate" (DeBakey, 1978).

There is a general contention that technology is outmoding our traditional ways of communication. The culture as a whole is seen as turning away from the written and printed word and toward a new culture of signals emitted by the electronic media, film, computer, pocket calculator, and a host of devices still to come. Thus, we need only attain the minimum ability to read and write required by the new devices. In theory, this ability might eventually disappear altogether, just as the art of illuminating manuscripts disappeared with the advent of movable type (Fadiman and Howard, 1979).

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